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# Stage to Screen, Branford Lawyer's Story Told

By JACQUELINE WEAVER

**S**ITTING in his law office in Branford, Retired Marine Major Walter Bansley is still bewildered by the commotion over a case he was involved in as a military lawyer, a case which has been dramatized on Broadway and will soon be released as a movie with an all-star cast.

"To tell you the truth, I was so nonplussed by this that I never mentioned it to my wife and kids," Major Bansley said.

But Hollywood thought otherwise. The actor Tom Cruise is playing Major Bansley in the film, "A Few Good Men," which will premiere in mid-December. It is the story of a group of marines who threw a "blanket party," or hazing session, for a member of their platoon who they believed was disloyal and of Major Bansley's role as investigator and counsel.

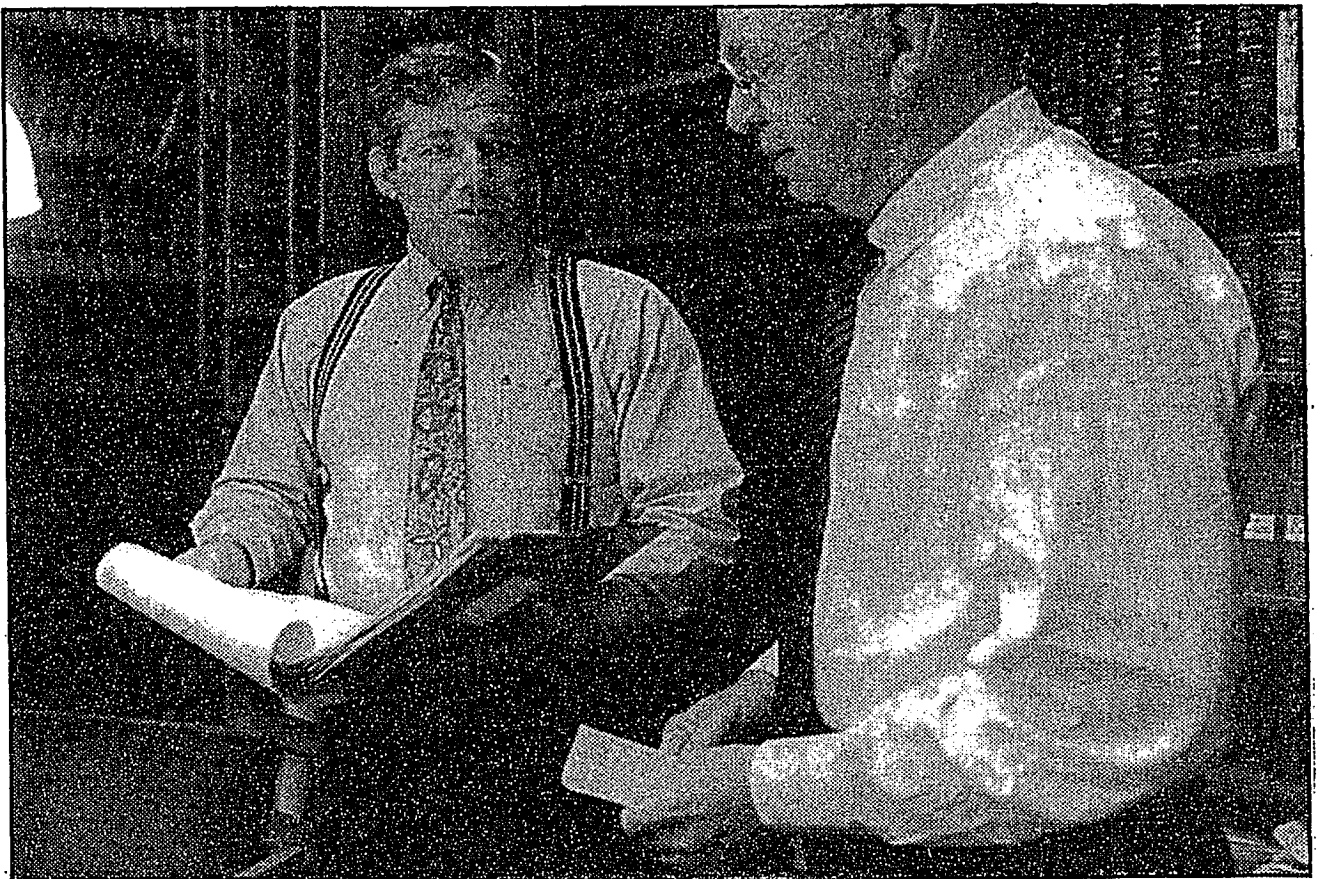
### Party Gone Awry

Major Bansley, a native of Brooklyn, had been stationed at the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, in 1986 when he received an urgent telephone call. The caller, a Navy admiral, said he needed help with a "delicate, serious matter" that had occurred at the United States naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. A blanket party had gone awry and a United States marine had nearly died. The incident, the admiral said, had international implications. It seemed the enlisted man, Pfc. William Alvarado, for months had been complaining to his Senator, his Congressman, his mother and anyone else who would listen, that the Marine training was too rigorous, that he was not being treated well. He also had contended, according to other sources, that some marines at Guantánamo Bay had fired without authorization into enemy territory.

"The politics of it was such that you had, potentially, a very high visibility situation," Major Bansley said in retrospect. "You had marines involved who were stationed on a Navy base. The admiral didn't want to have the appearance that the Navy was trying to give the Marines a hard time. On the other hand, I'm sure he didn't want to turn it over to the Marines to investigate. I was a Marine lawyer, yet technically under the control of the Navy at the time, so I was politically neutral."

That incident at Guantánamo Bay, as well as the subsequent investigation and trials, had all the makings of a good drama, which it eventually became.

"A Few Good Men," a play based on the episode and titled after the Marine recruiting slogan, was per-



Gale Zucker for The New York Times

formed on stage in the late 1980's. Later, the playwright, Aaron Sorkin, wrote the screenplay for the movie starring Cruise and Jack Nicholson. In the movie, Private Alvarado dies; in reality, he had lapsed into a coma and later recovered. The script adds a love interest, a military investigator, played by Demi Moore.

Major Bansley conducted the initial internal investigation and recommended that the matter be brought to trial. Later, he defended Lieut. William Adams, who supposedly gave the implied order that a blanket party be held for Private Alvarado.

### Was Hazing Sanctioned?

At issue was whether the Marines unofficially sanctioned hazing, and whether a ranking officer had urged, by innuendo, that a blanket party be staged for the private.

"A blanket party is given for a marine who is not performing up to acceptable standards," said Major Bansley, 42 years old, a career marine who retired in September after 20 years in the military. "The idea is to bring a recalcitrant marine back

into the fold."

Setting the scene, Major Bansley explained that esprit de corps is of paramount importance in a hostile area like Cuba, where opposing military forces are within a short distance of each other.

In the script, one character states that "for each American sentry post, there's a Cuban counterpart. They're called 'mirrors.'" Private Alvarado, Major Bansley said, was a malcontent, a man who continually tried to be excused from routine runs and duty assignments, and who wore his hair a little longer than most.

"He was perceived as not one of the team," Major Bansley said.

### The Chain of Command

More importantly, Private Alvarado, according to the script, was believed to have informed the Naval Investigative Service that fellow enlisted men had fired into enemy lines without authorization. The information supposedly was provided in exchange for help in being transferred out of Cuba.

Capt. David Robb, the company commander, was told that Private Alvarado was providing information to the naval investigative unit, Major Bansley said, and he was annoyed that the private had violated the chain of command by not coming to him first.

"The allegation was that Robb went to Col. Sam Adams and said he wanted Alvarado out of the company," Major Bansley recalled. "Adams then supposedly said, 'Let's keep him over the weekend and let him sweat.'"

Captain Robb then told the company of 140 marines that there was a "snitch" among them and that he wanted him out because he could not be relied upon.

"It was a rousing speech on loyalty," Major Bansley said. "Robb then said, 'Don't even guess who he is. He will be gone on Monday.'" That was on Friday. After the meeting, Lieut. William Adams asked for the identity of the informer and asked Captain Robb for permission to tell his squad leaders. Robb agreed.

"William Adams got the squad leaders together and said, and this is pretty much a quote: 'I don't want you to hurt him. I don't want you to touch him. I don't want you to take him to the third deck and throw him off. But if he falls down the steps in the middle of the night, oh well,'" Major Bansley said.

### Bound and Gagged

Early Sunday morning, fortified with several drinks, a group of young marines decided to teach Private Alvarado a lesson. They tied up his hands and feet with tape and put a blindfold over his eyes. The idea was to give him a haircut.

"They put a rolled-up stocking in his mouth," Major Bansley said. "It went down and he was asphyxiated." The young marines called for help and Private Alvarado, by now in a coma, was airlifted to emergency care. He remained in a coma for several days and recovered.

Major Bansley, at the time, was a senior marine in the Caribbean, and the senior Marine lawyer. After the emergency summons from the admiral, he arrived on the base in Cuba at 6 P.M. on a Friday and immediately began an Article 32 investigation, which is the military version of a grand jury investigation. It continued almost round the clock until Sunday morning. Major Bansley, in the end, recommended that the men go to trial.

Several days later, he received a call saying that Lieutenant Adams, the man accused of giving the implied order to frighten Private Alvarado, wanted Major Bansley to represent him against a charge of attempted murder.

Major Bansley said what he had not known at the time was that after his first visit to Cuba, Lieut. Gen. Albert Grey, then Commanding General of the Fleet Marine Force Atlan-

tic, had met with officers in Cuba, "ranted and raved" about Private Alvarado's brush with death, and told the hundred or so higher ranking men seated in the base theater that the Marines had never officially, nor unofficially, sanctioned blanket parties. And that is what they were to tell investigators.

All of which placed Major Bansley in the uncomfortable position of challenging the integrity of a general.

### 'More Accountable to the System'

"In the military, as a defense lawyer, you are more accountable to the system than to the client," he said. "No one in the military, especially if you are career oriented, likes to be a defense lawyer because you frequently have to go after the very system that you rely upon for promotion and assignment."

Which is what he did. The general's comments, Major Bansley said, came under the legal category of "unlawful command influence."

"We tried to have the case dismissed on that basis," he continued, but he said he could find only three men who would sign an affidavit as to what the general had said.

Ultimately, 7 of the 10 men who were charged took other than honorable discharges, and 3 were found guilty at trial of assault-related offenses. They served about one month in prison.

## Tom Cruise will play Major Bansley in 'A Few Good Men.'

Lieutenant Adams's case was dismissed for missing the statutory requirement for a speedy trial by one day.

"My main defense was going to be that the Marines did not act on Adams's implied orders," Major Bansley said. "Some had never heard his words."

### Without Military Cooperation

Aaron Sorkin, the playwright, had heard about the incident from a friend in the military. By this time, Major Bansley was at Camp Pendleton in California. He was asked to serve as a consultant to the movie production staff, but the Marines had not sanctioned the movie, so discouraged his involvement.

In the meantime, Major Bansley was nearing retirement and busy preparing for his return to civilian life. He had graduated from Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven in 1972 with a degree in education and enlisted in the Marines his senior year.

While in the Marines, he earned a master's degree in education from the University of Southern California, a law degree from Western State University College of Law at Fullerton, California, and a master of laws degree at the University of San Diego School of Law.

### Practicing Civil Law

Although he had several job offers on the West Coast, Major Bansley and his wife, JoAnn, decided to return to the East Coast and, since September, he has been practicing civil law in the firm of Roger Sullivan of Branford.

The couple, who has five children, bought a home in Branford town center, and has settled into suburban living.

"This type of law, civil law, is much cleaner," he said. "I'm not around criminals all day long. I have a lot to learn, but it's much less stressful. In fact, the biggest transition to civilian life is deciding what color tie to wear every morning."

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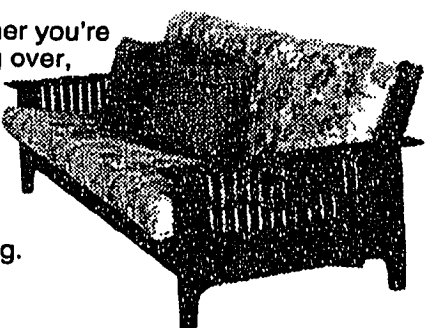
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